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The execution and origins of Thomas Boyson
by Francis Howcutt

When read together, two newspaper accounts report that at the Northamptonshire Assizes which ended on 13 July 1815, a man named Thomas Boyson was convicted of stealing nine ewe sheep at Milton (i.e. Milton Malsor), the property of Mr J Maule of Duston, and sentenced to death.[1] He was hanged on 28 July at Northampton, at the Racecourse which was the usual place for local executions at that time.

The final stage of his life was reported as follows:

> 'Yesterday, was executed here, pursuant to his sentence at our late assizes, Thomas Boyson, for sheep-stealing. From the time of his condemnation, he appeared to be greatly affected by his situation, and conducted himself as if desirous to make his peace with God. Till yesterday morning, however, he uniformly denied having committed any other but the crime for which he was to suffer, when, previously to receiving the sacrament, he confessed that some years ago he stole, at different times, 19 guineas from the box of a person who lodged in his house; and 11 sheep from Mr C Hillyard, at his farm at Milton in the year 1810, when he was in his service as shepherd: at the place of execution he appeared very penitent, confessed the justice of his sentence, and exhorted the spectators, who were very numerous, to take warning by his example.' [2]

Thomas' journey from the County Gaol to the Racecourse passed by the 'Bantam Cock' public house at Abington Square where it was customary for the convict to be allowed a last drink. The thatched building, seen in the following picture, has been redeveloped.

[1] *Northampton Mercury*, 15 July 1815, page 3, column 5; also
Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette, 22 July 1815, page 4, column 2.
[2] *Northampton Mercury*, 29 July 1815, page 3, column 6.

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Thomas was one of the last to be executed at the Racecourse. After 1818, hangings took place on the 'New Drop', which was erected at the County Gaol at the rear of the County Hall. Writing in 1896, John Taylor commented on the reasons for the change:

> 'The immense and always increasing crowds that went out of Northampton to see the executions were getting too large and too unruly, and the march of the condemned through the public streets was not in accordance with the growing sentiment of the people.'[3]

However, he also recorded that the new venue continued to attracts spectators who congregated outside the Goal, with some sightseers even walking from as far as Kettering and Market Harborough to attend the spectacle.

The Murder Act 1752 had established dissection (or 'anatomising') as an additional punishment for executed murderers. Attempts made in Parliament in 1786 and 1796 to change the law to extend dissection to other executed criminals were unsuccessful.[4] However, no record has been found of the burial of Thomas Boyson, so it is probable that his body was taken to Northampton Infirmary and met that fate.

Who was Thomas Boyson?

There does not appear to be a record of Thomas Boyson's age when he was executed.

The available indexes, whose entries have been checked in the parish registers, indicate that six people named Thomas Boyson (or Byson) were baptised in Northamptonshire between 1736 and 1800: [5]

Baptism	Parish	Parents	Death or burial
15 Jun 1755	Harpole	Wm & Susannah	Buried 1757 at Harpole
3 Feb 1760	Gayton	Richard & Elizabeth	
1 Apr 1781	Laxton	Thomas & Sarah Boyson	
5 Nov 1781	Harpole	John & Mary Boyson	
3 July 1791	Winwick	Edward & Alice	Died 1864 at Winwick aged 72
30 Aug 1795	Wappenham	John & Jane Boyson	

The deaths or burials of only two of them have been identified, leaving four possible candidates to be the executed sheep-stealer:

Baptism	Parish	Miles from Milton Malsor	Age in 1815	Notes
3 Feb 1760	Gayton	9	55	[1]
1 Apr 1781	Laxton	60	44	[2]
5 Nov 1781	Harpole	10	44	[3]
30 Aug 1795	Wappenham	24	20	[4]

[3] *Executions in Northampton*, page 12 by John Taylor. This is part of a published collection titled 'Historical Collections relating to Northamptonshire, 2nd series'.
https://archive.org/details/historicalcolle00taylgoog/page/n68/mode/2up
[4] *The Criminal Corpse, Anatomists and the Criminal Law: Parliamentary Attempts to Extend the Dissection of Offenders in Late Eighteenth-Century England* by Richard M Ward.
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4374108/
[5] Searches in the indexes of the Northamptonshire Birth & Baptisms indexes compiled by Alan Clarke & his colleagues and Ancestry's index to its scans of parish registers.

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[1] Thomas Boyson married Elizabeth Warwick at Gayton in 1785. Children of Thomas & Elizabeth Boyson were baptised at Rothersthorpe (1790), Wollaston (1800, 1802, 1804 & 1806). It is not certain that they were all of the same parents.
[2] No marriage or burial record has been found at Laxton which could be of the person baptised there.
[3] No marriage or burial record has been found at Harpole which could be of the person baptised there. Harpole is less than three miles from Duston, the home parish of Thomas' last employer.
[4] No marriage or burial record has been found at Wappenham which could be of the person baptised there.

The strongest candidate to be the sheep-stealer appears to be the one baptised at Harpole in 1781 but this is not certain. The question is unlikely to be resolved unless a record can be found that either states his birth place or his age when an adult.

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